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ABSTRACT

Writing teachers at the community college level who teach using a computer have come to accept the fact that it is more than "just teaching" composition. Such teaching often requires instructors to be as knowledgeable as some of the technicians. Two-year college students and faculty are typically given little support in using computers for composition. Instructors often spend time dealing with basic problems involving printing documents and retrieving data lost from diskettes. Many adjunct instructors (who comprise the bulk of the faculty using the computer room) receive little or no training in the software available to them. Sometimes faculty are unaware of the availability of the Internet in the computer room and find out only through their students. A very small number of adjunct instructors use the computer room as a place to dump their students. Other problems that arise include the ease of copies of other students' essays and reports being passed off as original work, and the proliferation of computer viruses. One solution would be to have one English instructor placed in charge of the computer writing lab whose responsibilities would include supervising the instruction in the lab and sitting on the school's technology committee. (RS)

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ED 414 593

Stephen J. Leone

Forty-Eighth Annual Convention
Conference on College Composition and Communication
March 14, 1997
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The Reality of Computers at the Community College Level

Computers at the community college level can probably best be summed up by the following two stories. The first involves a student I had last semester named John. As part of my requirements for the course and to make sure the students are using the computers for their assignments, I require them to hand in an electronic version of their essay with the final draft. The day before the essay was due, John was diligently typing away in the open computer lab to finish on time. When he was done, he got up, asked the technician for typing paper and then sat at one of the few IBM typewriters left and began typing away. Being curious, the technician went over to find out what John was doing. John's reply, and I quote, "Professor Leone requires an electronic copy of the essay so I'm typing it out now."

The second is even scarier because it involves a fellow instructor. She came running into my class ten minutes before the end of the period and twenty minutes before her class was to begin because she wanted to type up an assignment for her incoming class. I, surprisingly for the computer room, finished on time and packed up to go work on the computers in the open lab on a handout for the next week. Before I made it to the door, I was tackled (literally) because the instructor was having problems with her document. She couldn't get the lines off the paper, nor could she get it to print. What had happened? She spent almost fifteen minutes typing her assignment in the spreadsheet program Lotus 1-2-3. Luckily, I do know the program and was able to get it to print—not the most professional looking handout, but it worked. I, on the other hand, knew it was time to get out before I got stuck teaching another

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class.

What these two stories illustrate is that with the advent of computers we have had to go beyond the maxim of "just teaching" and accept the fact that there is this stranger in our classrooms whose presence is making us rethink what we teach and even how we teach. Look over the program for this year's conference[1] and notice the number of workshops, sessions, roundtables given over to the very idea of teaching composition on a computer or in a networked environment. And yet, look at the two-year faculty who are presenting, almost none are involved with presenting in any of these workshops. With all the pedagogy being disseminated, are we, at the community college level, really dealing with the changes that computers represent? And even more important, are we in the two-year faculty really using computers to their full advantage? Are we doing our student population a disservice by not requiring or offering any remedial programs on computer operations? Over 40% of our students already take remedial courses in writing, reading, and mathematics? Is the computer adding to their frustration?

Cynthia Selfe in her 1985 essay "The Electronic Pen: Using Computers and the Composing Process" put forth three points which she felt directly influences how well computers function as a writing instrument:

1. whether or not students were willing to exchange more traditional composing

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[1]The forty-eighth annual convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, March 12-15, 1997, in Phoenix, Arizona.

tools for a computerized word processor.

2. whether or not students were able to adapt their normal composing strategies to the computer and the word processing program they were using.

3. to what extent variables such as available computer time, documentation, lighting, and comfort affected students. (56)

I want to add to that list the following two statements:

1. how much knowledge the students have before walking into the classroom about computers and the terminology of computing.

2. whether or not the instructor feels comfortable with he or she is doing with a computer and how knowledgeable he or she is in the use of the word processing program.

I have worked in a computer writing lab since 1986, with my first experience being a high school writing lab. One of my duties was to offer a workshop every semester to the English faculty on how to use the current word processor which they had chosen. The computers were simple, Apple IIe's, and the word processor was just as simple. Now, over ten years later, the computers are more complex with word processing programs to match with no faculty instruction or updates offered. What does that mean for the above statements I've made?

For the students, what we see more and more are a direct division between those who use a computer at home and those who don't in how easily they adapt to composing on the

computer. Even the students who used a computer in high school, have a slight advantage over those who didn't, but that advantage is lost because most high school labs pre-load the program that will be used that period and provide teaching assistants to help the students. Because of this, they expect the same service when they get to college. However, where I teach, this is not the case. We expect them to be very independent on the computer and thus provide very little support beyond starting it up. As a writing instructor, my major concern should be just teaching writing and dealing with composing problems on the computer, but sadly, more of my time is devoted to reminding the students how to do simple functions such as printing and numbering the pages—even after setting up a template file in the first class.

At least once a week, I have to deal with students who have lost data from their diskettes for any number of reasons: took them out of the drive before the light turned off, stored them next to their walkman whose magnetic field was enough to scramble the data, placed them on the bottom of their pocketbooks where the shutter was bent, or ripped off, or is so loosen that it comes off in the disk drive—and my favorite—leaving the disks on the dashboard of the car for a week so they wouldn't forget for class the next week.

For the instructors, it is even worse. We have gone from the old Apple IIe's at the community college, to IBM compatible 386's to the latest Pentium processor. In that journey, we've gone from a very simple word processor called FrED (Free Educational Software) to Prowrite, a relatively simple windows based word processor, to, without any warning, Microsoft Word 7.0. The lone technician spent the entire first semester running back and forth

between the open lab and the closed lab answering questions on how to use the word processor. Questions which were all spelled out on a six page handout that covers the entire use of the word processor. Who asked the most questions? According to him, it was the writing instructors.

Just this past Wednesday, an instructor expressed surprise that there was a grammar checker attached to the word processor. He was even more shocked to find that the two leading word processors now can even break the essay down into its component parts (number of words, number of sentences, number of paragraphs, number of letters per word, words per sentence, sentences per paragraph, and evaluate the essays by three different readability scales.) In fact, most don't know that any of these features are available.

I'm sure a lot of you are thinking that all that needs to be done is offer a session, as I did on the high school level, for all instructors every semester. An easy solution for a complex problem. How do you offer such a workshop for instructors most of whom are adjuncts (except for one individual, it is only adjuncts using the computer lab this semester) whose schedules do not neatly fall into the free periods that we have, but none of the other schools they are teaching at. If I offered that workshop, do I also have to cover the grammar checker? Do I have to also explain what the Gunning-Fog readability scale is, and the problems and advantages to student writers or as a instructor-use editing tool? Or, should I just concentrate on the "nuts and bolts" of the word processor and leave the rest to the individual instructors?

Also, with that large part-time base, we can't even begin to effectively evaluate how

well computers are being used in composition. For instance Marcia Peoples Halio found in an informal survey that students who used Macintosh computers were poorer writers that the IBM-compatible users. In making the comparison, she found seven major differences in the writing between the two different platforms. She found the Mac users:

1. wrote fewer complex sentences
2. used more of the "to be" verb
3. scored lower on the Kincaid Readability Scale (Grade level 7.95 vs. 12.1)
4. used shorter sentences (16.3 words vs. 22.6)
5. used the subject as the opener of a sentence more often (80% vs. 66.5%)
6. never opened a sentence with a subordinating conjunction whereas IBMers did at least 9% of the time
7. were poorer proofreaders (Averaged 15 misspellings vs. 4 for IBMers). (18)

Now that we have adopted a Macintosh-like interface, have our essays begun to exhibit the same symptoms as the Macintosh essays of the past? Do we have any mechanism in place to test that? Sadly, the answer to both questions is no.

Of course these aren't the only problems. Using networked computers have left many frustrated. For instance, one of the problems the lab technician encounters on a daily basis is with printing. At least once a period he gets called into the computer writing lab by the instructor because a essay wouldn't print, only to find that the student hasn't gone beyond the print menu, nor has the instructor even checked for that first. That's not the big problem. I

use the lab every Friday morning at 8. I'm the first one in, when I can sneak in the backdoor with a friendly librarian, to set up the room. For the past three years, whenever I turn on the computers I get buffeted by a deluge of paper from the printers. The last instructor who would use the room the day before, when an essay wouldn't print told the students to print it again. He did this right up to the time he shut everything off and never left a note or told the technician. Because it is a network, all those copies were saved in the print buffer until the jam was cleared, or as the case usually was, the printers were finally turned on, and printed the next day. One morning I timed it. It took ten minutes to finish printing everything (usually five copies of every essay) from the day before. My five and three year old daughters love all that paper to draw on.

Of course that's changed now too. Along with the new word processor has been added the Internet. I heard one story of an instructor who was shocked to discover that we had the Internet available only when a student in her class had called up a very interesting site and was showing it to his friends.

I had known about the Internet connection because I taught summer school and was prepared to even integrate it into my class (sometimes I feel like the introductory composition class is beginning to resemble an overstuffed sausage casing with all that has had to be added in), but I wasn't ready for the change in my Friday morning printer deluge. It seems that a student the day before had decided that his mission was to download all the free pornography he could find on the Internet to the printer. For two weeks straight, whatever he didn't get

when the printers were turned off, I got. Needless to say, my daughters' supply of drawing paper has dwindled.

I mentioned briefly that the majority of the instructors using the computer room are adjuncts.[2] Other than the obvious problem of training, this has created another new problem: one I've come to call the electronic babysitter syndrome of the 90s. A few (a very small number) see the computer room as a place to dump their students. The extent of the instruction is here's the computer, here's your assignment, give it to me when you're finished. Or, what a couple do is let the students write (the proper action verb here should be compose, but what the students are doing in this case is just writing) on the computers and then meet during this time for student conferences. This is how I wind up with the Friday morning printed pornography parade, not to mention a computer room which is slowly being destroyed.

In some cases, it is not the adjunct's fault. Some feel they are underpaid for what they do and this is one way to make up for it. Others, who have lacked supervision, use the room in this way because they have never heard of any of the new pedagogy dealing with computers and composition.

My other concern deals with how many essays are being recycled because it is now easy to make any number of copies that a student wants. As an example, I also teach in a

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[2]The adjuncts present another fact that this conference is going to have to address even more directly in the immediate future since the majority of the writing classes are being taught by adjuncts. How can we talk of professional instructors of composition when the majority only teach three hours a week? Can we expect them to really keep abreast of the latest changes in the field when they have no real attachment to the field?

program set up by the local phone company to deal with a world which is rapidly changing and that now even requires entry level line workers to have some college credits. The beauty of the program is that the company has sent them to school with laptops (of which the instructors receive one as well). The afternoon instructor taught AC/DC electrical circuits after my class. To prove a point, one of his A students ran off enough copies of his last lab report to give everyone in the class a copy. All they had to do was print a new title page. His point was that the grades were arbitrary and, unfortunately, he was right. They all received different grades for the same report. What does that have to do with me? As the student told me the next semester, half-jokingly, it's ashame I'm teaching the course to the next group because now they can only pass on their lab reports, not their essays.

Of course, I can't talk about this program without mentioning the problems with viruses that are spread between the laptops. I spent one hour out of my three hour class teaching the students how to use an anti-virus program because an instructor the semester before contracted a virus on his laptop which then spread whenever a homework disk was returned—a virus still on many of the laptops a semester later.

The problems such as this go on and on—problems thai have only been compounded by the lack of adequate training we provide our instructors, most of whom are adjuncts, before sending them into this environment. And as long as I teach using a computer, I've come to accept the fact that it is more than "just teaching" composition. In fact, it requires me to be as knowledgeable as some of the technicians.

One solution I can offer is to have one English instructor placed in charge of the computer writing lab whose responsibilities include supervising the instruction in the lab and sitting on the school's technology committee. Too often, the technicians make the decisions for us assuming that English and computers don't mix.

Oh, in case you were wondering how John from the beginning made out in the class. Not as well as he should have. Not because he couldn't adapt the computer to his composing process, but because he learned how to use the computer too well. It seems his final research essay was two weeks late. He discovered soon after the lesson on the Internet, the chat rooms. Every time he sat down at a computer to type his essay, he first checked out his favorite chat room. Two hours later, he was late for class and hadn't typed a word of his essay. What is a writing instructor to do?

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